

Optional Sanity Rules

“If you gaze long enough into an abyss, the abyss will gaze back into you.”

—Nietzsche

The sanity and madness rules presented here are meant to enhance role-playing, create challenges for the players, and bring more color to the character. They are not intended as an inexorable march to retirement and/or death. There are other games for that (like *Call of Cthulhu*).

The characters in Dungeons & Dragons 5th edition are, above all else, exceptional. They are not regular folks thrust into extraordinary circumstances by chance. They are capable of winning virtually any fight, overcoming epic challenges, and creating miracles. These rules keep that spirit in mind.

The Descent into Madness

Characters may begin their careers with certain quirks, eccentricities, or foibles but none can be said to be insane. That comes later. Each encounter with an undead horde, gargantuan wyrm, or overwhelmingly powerful aberration leaves its mark upon their psyche. Taken singly their heroic nature allows them to continue to live a life of adventure, fight the good fight, and maintain some semblance of normalcy. The indelible mark on their psyche, however, can never quite be removed.

Sanity Score

Your character’s Sanity score is equal to her Charisma score plus her Wisdom modifier. The maximum Sanity score a character can achieve is 25. The character’s maximum Sanity and her current Sanity should be recorded separately.

The character’s Sanity can change based on Sanity checks. In most cases, the character can recover lost Sanity through either magic or the expenditure of downtime days. The character’s Sanity score cannot exceed her maximum as determined by her Charisma and Wisdom scores.

- Sanity Score = Charisma score plus Wisdom modifier (Max = 25)
- Your max Sanity score changes as your ability scores change
- The character should record their current Sanity and max Sanity
- Your Sanity score uses the same modifier scale as all other ability scores.

ABILITY SCORES & MODIFIERS	
Ability	Modifier
1	-5
2-3	-4
4-5	-3
6-7	-2
8-9	-1
10-11	+0
12-13	+1
14-15	+2
16-17	+3
18-19	+4
20-21	+5
22-23	+6
24-25	+7

Sanity Checks

To make a Sanity check roll a d20 and apply your current (not maximum) Sanity score modifier. If the roll is equal to or higher than the DC the character succeeds the check and is able to maintain her mental coherence. If the roll is less than the DC she fails the check. With a failed check she loses a portion of her Sanity and rolls on the madness table. Any madness that a character develops is transient unless otherwise noted. A roll of a natural 1 is considered a fumble and always fails. A specific encounter and/or named NPC/ creature can only incite a single Sanity check.

Failed Sanity Checks

A failed Sanity check has two results. The first is that the character's grasp on reality begins to slip and she loses a portion of her Sanity. Consequently, the character suffers a (usually) transient form of insanity as her mind struggles to process the situation. If a character must make more than one Sanity check, each check is handled independently and the effects are additive. If the character fumbles her Sanity check roll, i.e. rolls a natural 1, she automatically fails the check and the amount of Sanity lost is doubled.

Losing Sanity

After failing a Sanity check the player must roll 1d4. The result of that roll is the amount of Sanity that the character loses.

FOR EXAMPLE, Arkhos has a Charisma of 16 and a Wisdom of 8. His Sanity score is 15 (Charisma score plus his Wisdom modifier of -1) and his modifier is +2. He has to make a Sanity check upon facing an unspeakable horror. The DC for the check is 18. Arkhos rolls a 12, adds his modifier of +2, and has a final result of 14. He fails the check. Arkhos rolls a d4 and loses 2 points of Sanity from his interaction with the horror.

The player should compare the character's current Sanity to their maximum Sanity. If the Sanity loss brings the character to $\frac{1}{2}$ of her max Sanity her madness will be long-term. If the Sanity loss brings the character to $\frac{1}{4}$ of her max Sanity her madness will be indefinite. A character whose Sanity reaches zero is irrevocably insane and becomes an NPC.

Madness

Unless otherwise noted any madness developed by a character is transient. If a character fails a Sanity check while afflicted with a transient madness the subsequent insanity will be short-term. If a character is suffering from a short-term insanity and fails a Sanity check the newly developed psychosis is long-term.

A madness will continue to afflict a character until she has had the opportunity to calm herself, steel her nerves, garner the support of her compatriots, or in extreme cases seek treatment. The greater the damage to her intellect the more time and effort needed to suppress the manifestation of her failed Sanity check.

TRANSIENT INSANITY will continue to affect the character until she has completed the encounter that caused the Sanity check. To quell the transient insanity the character need only find a quiet place and spend a few minutes reassuring herself.

SHORT-TERM INSANITY afflicts the character until she has spent a short rest garnering the support of her friends, regaining her nerve, and rebuilding her mental defenses.

LONG-TERM INSANITY persists until the character is able to spend downtime to address the condition. If you are not using downtime in your campaign, it is after she has finished the adventure or quest she's on. She will need weeks of rest and support to quell the madness that has her in its grasp. After that time has elapsed the long-term insanity is resolved.

INDEFINITE INSANITY is permanent unless cured.

Going Insane

"All it takes is ONE BAD DAY to reduce the sanest man alive to lunacy...Just one bad day."

—Joker

The acute manifestation of the lunacy exhibited by the character should be thematically congruous with the situation that caused the initial sanity check. That said, the link between the symptoms and the situation causing the behavior may not be immediately obvious. This is an opportunity for the player and the DM to be creative and develop the character's idiosyncrasies.

The tables provide a plethora of options for the DM and player to explore for characters that are experiencing transient, short-term, long-term, and/or indefinite insanity. When relevant the DM should roll or choose an entry from the appropriate table below.

Short-Term/Transient Madness

The acute nature of these manifestations means the character can quickly shake them off. In the case of transient madness, a few moments out of combat is all that's needed, and for short-term insanity the character can resolve the condition with a short rest.

Long-Term/Indefinite Madness

The effects of long-term madness persist until a character is able to completely recover both mentally and physically from adventuring. A long-term condition ends after the character has had at least a few weeks' break from the stresses of adventuring.

The effects of indefinite madness are pervasive and cannot be cured except through exceptional intervention such as a wish spell or divine intervention. A character with a long-term and/ or indefinite madness should still be playable and can offer a great opportunity for role-playing.

After each long rest the character must make a Sanity check to see if she is able to temporarily suppress the effects of her condition until her next long rest. If the check fails the character suffers the effects of her psychoses until her next long rest, when she is able to repeat her Sanity check. If the check is successful, the psychosis is held at bay until the next long rest.

The initial DC for suppressing a long-term or indefinite madness is 10¹. With each successful Sanity check it becomes harder to suppress her madness and the DC increases by 1 over the previous check, until the character's condition manifests, and the process starts over.

FOR EXAMPLE, *Mal's experiences in the Underdark haunt him daily, or more precisely nightly. His particular form of indefinite madness manifests as night terrors. This morning he sets out for his next adventure and he checks to see if night terrors will affect him. He rolls a 7 and adds his Sanity modifier of +4 for a total of 11. He makes his check and is able to suppress the terrors. The next morning the DC is 11 and again he makes the check. By the third day the stress of the expedition is beginning to wear him down. The DC is now 12. He rolls a 6, adds his modifier and fails his check. During tonight's long rest he suffers from night terrors.*

If a character is unable to suppress their madness after a long rest it will manifest as a persistent effect and/or as an acute effect in times of stress. In those situations, the character may experience an acute attack of lunacy. Stressful encounters include combat situations and may include non-combat encounters such as negotiations or interrogations with NPCs at the DM's discretion.

During a high-stress situation, the PC may attempt to control themselves for the duration of that encounter. This requires a DC 12 Charisma save, and the character should apply her Wisdom modifier to the check. If the character fails her check she suffers the Acute effect associated with her madness.

What Incites a Sanity Check?

"I knew who I was this morning, but I've changed a few times since then"

—Alice

Exposure to magic, esoteric knowledge, or aberrant creatures may force the character to question her understanding of the world and can fray her mind. Additionally, situations of extreme terror, confrontation with one's own mortality, and outside attempts to control your mind leave marks that may never heal.

Magic Attacks and Effects

Magic can affect the health of one's mind in several ways. Merely casting some spells puts the caster's sanity at risk. More commonly, spells cause psychic damage by directly attacking the mind. Illusions and charms pose a

¹ If a character is suffering from multiple forms of madness each instance is handled independently.

risk as they target the victim's persona and perception. A more insidious danger are spells that induce direct contact between the minds of the caster and another creature. As a rule of thumb, a spell must be of 3rd level or inflict 25 points of psychic damage in a single attack to cause a Sanity check. If a spell deals damage over multiple rounds each instance of damage is handled individually.

DC = 8 + spell level

FOR EXAMPLE, *Dexter casts Phantasmal Killer against Gor-Og. Gor-Og fails his save and takes 31 psychic damage. After the damage is dealt Gor-Og must make a Sanity check (DC 12) to see if he loses Sanity and is affected by transient madness. The following round Gor-Og fails his save against the spell again but only takes 18 points of damage, and therefore does not need to make a Sanity check. On the third round Gor-Og saves against the spell and its effects end.*

EXAMPLES OF SPELLS THAT CAUSE A SANITY CHECK:

- Confusion (4th level, PHB, pg. 224)
- Contact Other Plane (5th level, PHB, pg. 226)
- Fear (3rd level, PHB, pg. 239)
- Feeblemind (8th level, PHB, pg. 239)
- Magic Jar (6th level, PHB, pg. 257)
- Symbol (7th level, PHB, pg. 280)

EXAMPLES OF SPELLS THAT DEAL PSYCHIC DAMAGE:

- Feeblemind (PHB, pg. 239)
- Geas (PHB, pg. 245)
- Phantasmal Killer (PHB, pg. 265)
- Vicious Mockery (PHB, pg. 285)
- Weird (PHB, pg. 288)

Forbidden Knowledge

Tomes and codices of unspeakable evil or unknowable truths have driven many sages to lunacy. The histories, spells, and rituals contained within such eldritch books as *Iggwilv's Demonomicon*, the *Necronomicon*, and *Nameless Cults* attack the reader's mind with each page read and truth learned.

DC = 8 + the level of the highest spell in the tome²

² If the tome does not contain spells the DC is 12 for a rare item, 14 for very rare, 16 for legendary, and 18 for an artifact.

Unspeakable Horrors

Aberrations and fiends by their very nature can crack the protective walls around a character's mind. Creatures of either of these types may induce a Sanity check at the DM's discretion. The sight of a creature whose CR exceeds the character's level by 3 or more always provokes a Sanity check.

$$DC = 8 + [\text{creature CR} - \text{the character's level}]$$

FOR EXAMPLE, *Kairon, (Fighter, 10th level) comes face to face to with her first rakshasa (CR 13). Immediately upon spying the fiend she must make a Sanity check. The DC for the check is 11 [8 + (rakshasa's CR of 13 – Kairon's level of 10)]. Kairon's current Sanity score is 14. She rolls a 10 and adds her Sanity score modifier for a final roll of 12; she succeeds at her Sanity check.*

Mind-Numbing Terror

The activation of the hindbrain due to extreme terror often causes an immediate effect on a character's psyche. Few things incite that terror more than the sight of legions of undead razing everything in their path. An encounter in which the characters are outnumbered by at least 5 to 1 induces a Sanity check.

$$DC = 8 + [\text{encounter CR} - \text{the character's level}]$$

For a horde of creatures use this table to determine the CR of the encounter:

CR OF THE CREATURES IN THE HORDE	
Number of Creatures	Multiplier
1	x 1
2	x 1.5
3-6	x 2
7-10	x 2.5
11-14	x 3
15+	x 4

FOR EXAMPLE, *Griswald (Rogue, 2nd level) encounters a roving pack of 10 ghasts (CR 2). The effective CR of the encounter is 5 (CR x 2.5) and the DC of the Sanity check is 11. Griswald must make a Sanity check. He rolls a 4, applies his modifier of +3, and fails the check. The sight of the ghasts unhinges his mind. He loses sanity and must roll on the transient madness table.*

The presence of an unholy greater undead has the same effect. The sight of an undead creature whose CR exceeds the character's level by 3 or more provokes a Sanity check.

$$DC = 8 + [\text{creature CR} - \text{the character's level}]$$

The final way in which stark terror may affect the stability of the character's mind is if a character fumbles (rolls a natural 1) on a check against a fear effect. If the character's level is equal to or greater than the creature that generated the fear effect the DC is 8.

$$DC = 8 + [\text{creature CR} - \text{the character's level}]$$

Struggle for Dominance

The struggle for dominance between a sentient item and its owner may damage the wielder's mind. If the wielder loses a Conflict between herself and her item, and the item possesses her, she should make a Sanity check as the item overwhelms her mental defenses and forces her to act as it wishes.

$$DC = 12 + \text{the item's Charisma modifier}$$

Character Death

Any character that fails their 3rd death save and is subsequently brought back to life through whatever means are available to her allies loses 1 Sanity point. This point cannot be restored by any means short of a wish. If this change causes the character's Sanity to be $\frac{1}{2}$ or $\frac{1}{4}$ of her max Sanity she rolls on the long-term or indefinite madness table respectively.

Getting Better

"She was always trying to hide, the beautiful chaos in her mind."

— Joker

Recovering Sanity does not cure any madness that was developed due to Sanity loss. The underlying conditions resolve automatically after the character has taken the necessary time to come to terms with her experiences or, in the case of indefinite madness, has it cured with a wish or other similar magic.

Recovering Between Adventures

The character may attempt to recover her newly-lost Sanity between sessions. This attempt at treatment may only be done once, at the end of the adventure in which the character incurred the Sanity loss.

- The DC is dependent on how much Sanity was lost in the preceding adventure
- $DC = 8 + \text{the total Sanity lost}$
- The character should apply her current Sanity score modifier to this roll

- Regardless of roll, the character may not increase her Sanity beyond her maximum Sanity score
- Natural 20: always a success and regains 2d4 Sanity
- Success: regains 1d4 Sanity
- Failure: no change in Sanity
- Critical Failure: loses 1d2 Sanity

FOR EXAMPLE, *Griswald's encounter with ghosts caused him to lose 3 Sanity points. Now that he has survived that harrowing experience and it is behind him, he is able to spend the next month fishing and relaxing to recover from the ordeal. After the month Griswald makes a Sanity check. The DC is 11. He rolls an 11 and adds his Sanity score modifier of +2 for a 12. He succeeds. He rolls a d4 and recovers 2 Sanity points, bringing his current Sanity up to 16.*

Treating Madness with Spells

A player cannot choose to fail a save against any of the following spells.

- *Beacon of Hope* — the target(s) have advantage on Sanity checks
- *Bless* — bonus can be applied to Sanity checks
- *Calm Emotions* — ends the effects of a transient/short-term madness or suppresses long-term/indefinite madness for the duration of the spell
- *Charm Person* — as calm emotions for the duration of the spell
- *Dominate Beast/Monster/Person* — as calm emotions for the duration of the spell
- *Enthrall* — as calm emotions for the duration of the spell
- *Geas* — as calm emotions for a single psychosis for the duration of the spell
- *Greater Restoration* — cure a long-term (or shorter duration) madness
- *Heal* — restore 1d4 Sanity or cure a long-term (or shorter duration) madness
- *Holy Aura* — advantage on all Sanity checks; creatures that have failed a Sanity check and are within the radius of the spell may repeat the check at the end of their turn, ending the transient/short-term madness on a success
- *Lesser Restoration* — allows the character to make an additional save to end the effects of a transient/short-term madness
- *Mass Heal* — as heal
- *Mass Suggestion* — as calm emotions for the duration of the spell
- *Mind Blank* — automatically succeeds all Sanity checks while the spell is active; the character is also affected as calm emotions for the duration of the spell
- *Modify Memory* — the target's memories of a specific event causing Sanity loss can be erased, reversing any Sanity loss and/or psychoses that resulted from the original failed Sanity check
- *Suggestion* — as calm emotions for the duration of the spell
- *Wish* — can restore 2d4 sanity points or cure any single form of madness that a character is suffering from, up to and including indefinite madness

Optional Feat: Resilient Psyche

Choose one ability score, either Charisma or Wisdom. You gain the following benefits:

- Increase the chosen ability score by 1, to a maximum of 20
- You gain proficiency in Sanity checks

Class Updates

Some adventuring classes are more resilient to the mental strains and stresses of encountering these potentially Sanity-breaking scenarios.

The combination of faith and inner strength that clerics and paladins possess allows them to add their proficiency bonus to any Sanity checks.

The force of will of monks allows them to use their Stillness of Mind feature to end a transient/short-term madness. Monks may also use this feature to suppress the acute effects of a long-term/indefinite madness for one encounter. When a monk gains the Diamond Soul feature she may add her proficiency bonus to Sanity checks.

Warlocks are able to use the strength of their pact and unique perspective to add their proficiency modifier to Sanity checks.

Sanity Cheat Sheet

Sanity Checks

Roll a d20, apply any Sanity modifiers, and compare to the DC of the check. A natural 1 always fails. Each encounter/creature can only incite a single Sanity check. Additional checks in a single encounter could be from psychic attacks/ damage, character death, struggle for dominance, and/or exposure to forbidden knowledge.

Failed Sanity Check

The character suffers a (usually) *transient* form of insanity and loses 1d4 Sanity. If the player rolled a natural 1 on the check, the Sanity loss is doubled. When your character's Sanity is at $\frac{1}{2}$ of her maximum the madness is *long-term*; when it is $\frac{1}{4}$ of its maximum the madness is *indefinite*.

Duration of Madness

Transient is until the end of the encounter, *short-term* until the end of a short rest, *long-term* until the character takes a break from adventuring, and *indefinite* is until cured.

SHORT-TERM MADNESS: If a character fails a Sanity check while afflicted with a transient madness the subsequent madness will be short-term.

LONG-TERM/INDEFINITE MADNESS: If a character is suffering from a short-term insanity and fails a Sanity check the newly developed madness is long-term. Long-term and Indefinite madness may also be a result of decreases in the character's Sanity score.

SUPPRESSING LONG-TERM/INDEFINITE MADNESS: After each long rest the character may attempt to suppress the madness (DC = 10 + days since previous bout) until her next long rest.

Causes of Sanity Checks

- **MAGIC ATTACKS & EFFECTS:**
DC = 8 + spell level
- **FORBIDDEN KNOWLEDGE:**
DC = 8 + level of highest spell in the tome
- **UNSPEAKABLE HORRORS:**
DC = 8 + (Creature CR – PC's level)
- **MIND NUMBING TERROR:**
DC = 8 + (Encounter CR – PC's level)
- **STRUGGLE FOR DOMINANCE:**
DC = 12 + item's Charisma modifier
- **CHARACTER DEATH:**
Automatic failure and loss of 1 Sanity

Getting Better

BETWEEN SESSIONS: DC = 8 + the total Sanity lost (note the character should use her current Sanity modifier).

- Natural 20: always succeeds (regardless of DC) and regains 2d4 Sanity
- Success: regains 1d4 Sanity
- Failure: no change in Sanity
- Rolls a natural 1: loses 1d2 Sanity

SPELLS: numerous spells are available to prevent, treat, and/or suppress madness.

Class-Specific Updates

Paladins, Clerics, and Warlocks are all able to add their proficiency bonus to Sanity checks.

Monks may end a transient or short-term madness using the Stillness of Mind feature. Stillness of Mind can also suppress a long-term or indefinite madness for one encounter. The Diamond Soul Monk feature allows the monk to add her proficiency bonus to Sanity checks.